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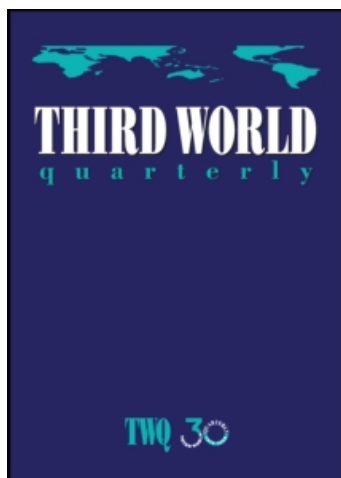
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The Identity of Turkey: Muslim and secular

AYLA GÖL

ABSTRACT *This article analyses the rise of political Islam in Turkey in the context of the AKP's tenure in power with reference to complex social, economic, historical and ideational factors. It aims to answer one of the key questions, which has wider implications for the West and Islamic world: 'having experienced the bad and good of the West in secularism and democracy', as claimed by Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis, is Turkey in transition from a secular to an Islamic state? The article first questions Turkey's 'bridge' or 'torn-country' status and then explains the AKP's ambivalent policies towards religious and identity issues in relation to the increased public visibility of Islam and a 'performative reflexivity' of 'Muslim-selves'. It concludes that the real issue at stake is not the assumed clash of secular and Muslim identities but the complex of interdependence between Islam, secularism and democratisation in Turkey.*

Islam has evoked widespread national and international concern as a source of political tensions since the AK Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—Justice and Development Party) came to power in Turkey in November 2002. At the national level, within less than a year of its second electoral victory in 2007, the holy trinity of secular establishment—the army, the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—People's Republic Party) and the Kemalist elite—accused the AKP of being 'a centre of anti-secular activities' and the Constitutional Court (Anayasa Mahkemesi) prepared an indictment against the party which would see it closed down and its leaders banned from politics for violating the principle of secularism.¹ At the international level concerns have been raised over the impact of the AKP's closure and its reflection on Turkey's relations with the EU and the USA.² On 30 July 2008 the court announced its verdict that there was not enough evidence to close down the AKP and instead opted to cut state funding to the party by half.³ Many argued that the court found a middle ground between the secular establishment and the government by taking the international and domestic context of its decision into account. In particular, the AKP's pro-EU policies were interpreted as evidence that the government did not aim to establish an Islamic state based on Islamic law (*Shari'a*).⁴

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For the secularists, however, this decision had a different meaning that confirmed the engagement of the ruling party in anti-secular activities and gave a 'serious warning' to its leaders. Staunch secularists still fear that the AKP has a hidden agenda to transform Turkey from a secular to an Islamic state.⁵ Since the 2007 election similar debates have occupied the agenda of the national media, which have speculated about the possibility of Turkey becoming a 'second Iran' or 'another Malaysia' within 10 years.⁶ These claims reflect two assumptions: Islam is incompatible with secularism and democracy; and there is a clash of Muslim and secular identities.⁷ If these assumptions are accurate, Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' and 'torn-country' theses are validated: the rise of political Islam in Turkey is a reaction to the failed modernisation based on Kemalist secularism and Turkey is the subject of an identity crisis between the West and Islam. This article aims to answer one of the key questions that has wider implications for the West and the Islamic world: is the AKP government transforming Turkey from a secular to an Islamic state?

The first section of the article examines Turkey's Islamic identity and its problematic status in Western civilisation by engaging with Huntington's claims. After evaluating Turkey's torn-country status, the second section analyses the AKP's policies on Islam. It explores historical and sociological factors that determine the ruling party's ambivalence towards Islam. The article concludes by examining the secular establishment's accusations of the AKP's hidden agenda and their implications for the 21st century.

Eurasian bridge or torn country?

Turkey is usually described as a bridge—the so-called bridge theory—between Europe and Asia, the West and the (Middle) East, or Western and Islamic civilisations.⁸ This identification seems logical given the fact that Turkey is geographically located between Europe and the Middle East. Turkey as a bridge between two regions is 'an oft-repeated cliché' which has recently gained an element of relevance.⁹ Historically Turkey was the first example of the transition of an Islamic empire to a modern secular nation-state outside Europe. It is also the first and only Muslim country to have achieved candidature for EU membership. However, the ongoing debates about Turkey's membership in the EU and the AKP's rise to power have called into question not only its role as a bridge, but also the nature of 'Turkish identity', history and culture in the context of Western secular and Muslim collective identity.¹⁰

Clash of secular and Muslim identities

The AKP called an early election in July 2007 as a result of the clash between the secular establishment and the government over the announcement of the presidential candidacy of the former foreign minister, Abdullah Gül. He was accused of having a hidden Islamist agenda, and his wife wears a headscarf, which is banned in all public institutions and state buildings—including the

presidential palace—and is usually regarded as a symbol of political Islam by the secularists in Turkey.¹¹ The confrontation over Gül's candidacy initiated a series of debates between secularists and Islamists.¹²

On 27 April 2007, before the elections, the Turkish military, by way of a so-called 'press release' on the General Staff's web page, warned the government against anti-establishment activities and fundamentalist (*irticai*) developments contrary to the basic principles of the Turkish Republic. Within this context the Turkish armed forces declared itself part of the secularist debate as 'an absolute protector of *laiklik* [laicity]' and would take immediate action when necessary.¹³ There was an 'e-memorandum' along the same lines as the 'press release'. Secularists accused AKP leaders of seeking a 'silent' Islamist revolution since taking power in 2002.¹⁴ Analysts claimed that the secular establishment was concerned about the pro-Islamic policies of the AKP, which could bring to an end Atatürk's legacy and his *laic* (secular) Turkish republic.¹⁵

Within this national context an early general election was held on 22 July 2007. Many analysts speculated that the ruling AKP would win the election with a majority but hardly anyone predicted a landslide victory with 46.6 % of votes, except for one polling research agent (KONDA—see Figure 1).¹⁶ Many columnists identified the elections of 2007 as the most important event and turning point in Turkish political history.¹⁷ While the AKP supporters regarded the election result as an unprecedented victory, the Kemalist elite described it as a political earthquake.¹⁸

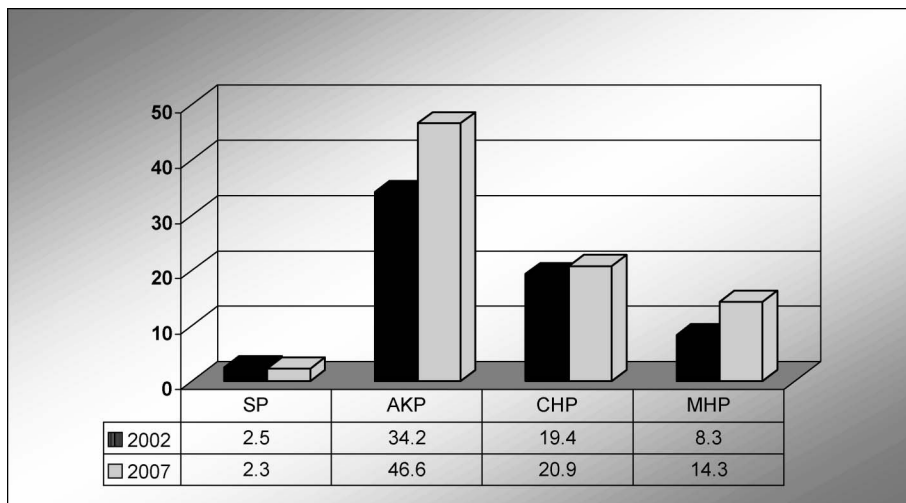


FIGURE 1. Results of Turkish elections in 2002 and 2007.

Notes: SP: Saadet Partisi—The Felicity Party, the only 'true Islamist' party and EU sceptics; AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—Justice and Development Party, a conservative centre-right party and pro-EU; CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—People's Republic Party, the Kemalist left-wing party and EU sceptics; MHP: Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—Nationalist Movement Party, the ultra-nationalist party and EU sceptics.

Two key events since the AKP's landslide victory have strengthened the fears of the government's sceptics. First, on 28 August 2007, Abdullah Gül was elevated to the presidency despite the objections of the secular establishment. Second, the AKP's decision to remove a decades-long ban on the wearing of headscarves at universities has been interpreted as representing the rise of political Islam in Turkey, endangering the previous bastion of secularism in the Muslim world.¹⁹ The origins of these fears resonated in Huntington's clash of civilisations thesis.

Redefining civilisational identities

According to Huntington, rather than a 'bridge', Turkey had become a 'torn' country that 'has a single predominant culture which places it in one civilization but its leaders want to shift to another civilization'.²⁰ As Huntington argues, 'a bridge ... is an artificial creation connecting two solid entities but is part of neither. When Turkey's leaders term their country a bridge, they euphemistically confirm that it is torn'.²¹ He also identifies Australia, Mexico and Russia as other torn countries, which are identified by two characteristics:

Their leaders refer to them as a 'bridge' between two cultures, and observers describe them as Janus-faced. 'Russia looks West—and East'; 'Turkey: East, West, which is best?'; 'Australian nationalism: Divided loyalties'; are typical headlines highlighting *torn country identity problems*.²²

In Huntington's opinion, among these states Turkey is 'the classic torn country which since the 1920s has been trying to modernize, to Westernize, and to become part of the West'.²³ He argues that the Muslim character of Turkish society and the Islamic legacy of the country are incompatible with Westernisation and modernisation. Despite the secular character of the Turkish state, Huntington places it in the Islamic civilisational realm when categorising civilisations of the world.²⁴

Based on his essentialist understanding of Islam and unitary conceptualisation of civilisational identity, Huntington claims that 'at some point, Turkey could be ready to give up its frustrating and humiliating role as a beggar pleading for membership in the West and to resume its much more impressive and elevated historical role as the principal Islamic interlocutor and antagonist of the West'.²⁵ According to his claim, Turkey is more likely to turn back to its Islamic identity after 'having experienced the bad and good of the West in secularism and democracy'.²⁶ It seems that, as Casanova suggests, 'Huntington would apparently welcome such a transformation of Turkey from a secular to a Muslim state, if only to fulfil his own prophecy of the inevitable clash of civilisations'.²⁷ However, Huntington's claims in the context of Turkey's relations with the West are historically and geopolitically misleading. One can only assume that Huntington must be referring to the golden age of the Ottoman Empire as the antagonist of the West. Huntington does not emphasise the fact that the Sublime

Porte—*Bab-i Ali*—was ‘geopolitically’ part of the Concert of Europe and had been developing close relations with the West through war, trade and diplomacy throughout history.²⁸ Even the historical discourse of the ‘sick man of Europe’ depicted the Ottoman Empire in Europe not in Asia.

Huntington does not pay attention to the fact that Turkey’s pro-Western orientation dates back to the Ottoman modernisation policies of the 19th century and, therefore, should not be considered to have originated in the establishment of the Turkish Republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s.²⁹ Furthermore, since modern Turkey has already secured its membership in the key military (NATO in 1952) and cultural (the Council of Europe in 1949) organisations of the West, Huntington’s claim about Turkey’s ‘humiliating role as a beggar pleading for membership in the West’ is irreconcilable, unless he is referring to Turkey’s problematic candidacy for the economic organisation of European states, the EU.³⁰ In fact, Turkey’s unsettled candidacy within the EU reflects the political divisions among member states in relation to what the European project and identity means, not necessarily the Turkish ambivalence to the West *per se*. It seems there is a tacit agreement to refer to a ‘prior Christian heritage’ in relation to the European project.³¹ It is not Turkey but the European states that have to decide what this project means and reach an agreement as to whether they recognise Turkey’s place in Europe or not.

According to Huntington’s thesis, there are at least three requirements of redefining a torn country’s civilisational identity: ‘First, the political and economic elite of the country has to be generally supportive of and enthusiastic about this move. Second, the public has to be at least willing to acquiesce in the redefinition of identity. Third, the dominant elements of the host civilisation, in most cases the West, have to be willing to embrace the convert.’³² If we apply these conditions to current identity politics in Turkey there are contradictory aspects which refute Huntington’s claims. I turn to them now.

Pro-Western policies

In relation to Huntington’s first requirement the AKP elite and supporters, as true Islamists, are expected to be against Turkey’s pro-Western orientation. However, and despite the party’s religious roots, the AKP leaders have not challenged Turkey’s pro-Western/EU policies since they took power. If Huntington were right, they would give up the aim of previous Turkish governments to become a member of the EU and would redefine Turkey’s identity as an Islamic state, thus acclaiming its Islamic civilisation. The AKP government would then have turned its back on the West (USA, EU and IMF) and broken relations with Israel.³³ But, on the contrary, Turkey’s relations with Israel have peaked and trade between the two countries doubled under the AKP government between 2002 and 2008.³⁴ The AKP was the only party that promised to continue political reforms in order to achieve Turkey’s EU membership and this promise was one of the factors that brought it victory in the 2007 elections. The AKP’s pro-EU policies also had a

considerable influence on the Constitutional Court's decision not to close down the party a year later.³⁵ Ironically two secular parties—the Kemalist CHP and the nationalist MHP—not the AKP, used anti-EU discourses against Turkey's membership during the 2007 elections (see Figure 1).³⁶ Clearly, reality and Huntington's understanding of Turkey's Western orientation are contradictory.

Protest meetings

According to the second requirement of Huntington's torn country claim, the redefinition of a civilisational identity takes place reluctantly without protests. However, the political tension between Kemalist secularists and the AKP government has been highlighted by protest meetings. These rallies—described as the Republic Protests (*Cumhuriyet Mitingleri*)—which took place in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir between April and May 2007 were the first example of its kind in Turkish history. There are controversial debates about which groups—in particular retired army officers and the CHP—were involved in organising these meetings but millions of people were mobilised and they were strongly supported by NGOs, in particular women's and civil society organisations.³⁷ Some analysts claimed that these street demonstrations did not reflect the political will and identity of the majority of Turkish society and that the numbers of participants were exaggerated.³⁸ Despite the secularists' expectations, however, these rallies did not increase the numbers of votes for the Kemalist party (CHP) in 2007. Nevertheless, they represented the voice of secular reactionaries, who believed that secularism is the route to religious harmony in modernising Turkey. The protest meetings challenge the second requirement of Huntington's torn-country claim.

According to Huntington, 'Turkey may be equally qualified to lead Islam. But to do so it would have to reject Atatürk's legacy more thoroughly than Russia has rejected Lenin's'.³⁹ Street protests indicate the opposite: many demonstrators carried pictures of Atatürk and Turkish flags while chanting slogans to express their determination to protect secularism and republicanism as the main principles of Kemalism.⁴⁰ These rallies demonstrated the determination of some sections of Turkish society to protect Atatürk's legacy and support the country's secular system against any Islamic agenda.

The support of civilians—particularly women and civil society organisations—for these protests indicated an increased awareness of the issue of women's rights in a secular system. The clash between the secular and Muslim identity of Turkish women became visible through a loud public voice.⁴¹ The earlier street protests also had a relatively immediate impact on the political empowerment of women in Turkey: 49 women members of parliament were elected in 2007. 'Of the 49, 29 are from the AK Party, and almost all of them are modern academics, free professionals and businesswomen who would constitute the first row of opposition to a system that would deny them their civil rights and freedoms.'⁴² The new political landscape in Turkey gives the impression that the Islamist women will not concede any of their democratic rights, while secularists will also resist,

protecting their secular identities and lifestyles from any possible threat of transforming Turkey into an Islamic state.

Furthermore, the street protests provided a platform for discussion of secular democracy in a predominantly Muslim country. The demonstrators strongly criticised the role of the army in Turkish politics as well as the allegedly hidden Islamic agenda of the AKP government. For secular demonstrators neither a military coup nor an Islamic state based on *Shari'a* was desirable for Turkish democracy.⁴³ They believed that their secular identity and daily lifestyles, including the freedom to drink alcohol, the choice for women to obtain driving licences, wearing non-religious clothing—from mini-skirts to bikinis—and not wearing headscarves, was threatened by the Islamic lifestyle envisaged by the AKP.⁴⁴ 'They presented a picture, which is young, modern not only urban but also urbane.'⁴⁵ At the same time there were slogans that were reminiscent of the 1920s narrative, which reflected the foundational principles of the Turkish Republic. Interestingly enough, they used traditional, nationalist and anti-USA slogans.⁴⁶ When the Turkish parliament voted to change the constitution to remove the headscarf ban in universities in February 2008, many demonstrated in Ankara against the proposed amendments and called for the government's resignation. They demonstrated again against the possibility of a military coup in June 2008.⁴⁷ The continuity of these street demonstrations refutes Huntington's second requirement by indicating that there is neither a rejection of Atatürk's legacy by Turkish society as a whole nor a reluctant transformation without protests.

The host civilisation

Huntington's third requirement of the redefinition of a civilisational identity, whether the host civilisation is willing to embrace the convert, deserves careful consideration. When the host civilisation—the West—defines 'Western civilisation,' geo-strategically and ideologically there is no obstacle to accepting Turkey as part of the West, ie as a member of NATO. If Western civilisation is defined culturally and religiously, the diversity of Turkey, with its five-times-a-day calls to prayer and *Eurasian* identity, becomes an obstacle. Consequently Turkey is seen as not Western enough. This simplified logic leads us to the view that it belongs to Islamic civilisation. Unfortunately, Huntington's thesis does not acknowledge that Turkey's place in the Muslim world is also problematic because of its secular character and, therefore, it is not qualified to lead Islam. So-called 'true Islamic' states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia are ready to lead Islam. Thus, the other host civilisation—the Islamic world—would not be willing to embrace a redefined Turkey either.

Additionally, Huntington's thesis implies that only the Kemalist-oriented elite wants to be part of the West, while society itself has an Islamic identity and does not accept such convergence. But a democratically elected AKP government with 46.6% of votes represents a majority political will that supports the government's policies to continue Turkey's pro-EU orientation.

If Huntington were right, Turkish voters would opt for anti-EU policies, which were promoted by other secular and nationalist parties (the CHP and MHP—see Figure 1). Moreover, as Jung argues, ‘the view from inside Turkey attests that Huntington’s picture is a mere caricature of Turkey’s political realities. Certainly, there is—as in all EU member-states—a broad coalition of EU sceptics’.⁴⁸ Even if Turkey does not become a member of the EU in the near future, the possibility of turning itself into an Islamic state, based on Huntington’s torn-country claim, seems to be a preposterous suggestion unless its sceptics are right that the AKP has a hidden agenda to Islamise the state. Therefore the most puzzling aspect of the AKP’s policies is its ambivalent attitude towards Islam.

The AKP’s ambivalent policies towards Islam

The puzzle that the AKP presents is more complex than Huntington’s thesis suggests: if the AKP’s domestic and foreign policies have not yet shown any anti-modernisation and anti-Western orientations, and if the government is determined more than any previous one to achieve Turkey’s EU membership how can these policies be compatible with the pro-Islamic roots of the AKP? The answer lies in its ambivalent attitude towards Islam. Sociologically Turkey can never abandon Islam *per se* for two reasons: it is an historical political marker and an integral part of Turkish cultural identity. In the Turkish context Islam was placed under the control of state, which is described as ‘authoritarian’ secularism in the literature.⁴⁹

With the election results of 2002 and 2007 it became clear that Islam does not have the negative connotation that it does in the West post-9/11: it is accepted as one existing social dynamic; and it is not seen as a source of fear and terror. Therefore the majority of Turks do not regard Islam through the prism of ‘Islamophobia’, which is increasingly prevalent in the West, as is an inflated perception of the ‘Islamic threat’.⁵⁰ This was evident when the CHP sought to win the election through the politics of fear of Islam but failed to manipulate Turkish society. Despite its failure at the elections, the CHP continues to manipulate the increased public visibility of Islam in order to rally support for its secularist agenda. The next section explains how the Islamic card has always been part of a political agenda in Turkey.

The Islamic card

The AKP is not the first party to play the ‘Islamic card’ in Turkish politics. Since 1950 both right-wing and religious parties have used the religious factor for their own ends. The AKP learned from the mistakes of its predecessors: the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi, MSP) under the leadership of Necmeddin Erbakan in the 1970s; the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, AKP), again under Erbakan’s leadership, in the 1980s and 1990s; the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP) and the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP) which were established after the 1997 ‘postmodern’ coup.⁵¹ The SP was established to represent strongly Islamist views in 2001, after the Constitutional Court

closed down the Virtue Party for anti-secular activities in the same year.⁵² All these parties clearly played the 'Islamic card' during election campaigns. In particular, despite its Islamic views, the SP's failure in both elections (it won 2.5% of votes in 2002 and 2.3% of votes in 2007) demonstrated that voters cared more about economic than religious issues.⁵³ The 2007 election was testimony to the fact that the AKP learned this lesson well. Both Turkish and Western economists agree that the AKP government has achieved economic stability, decreased inflation (to almost under 10%), brought economic growth (at a peak of 9% in 2007), and that foreign investment poured in between 2002 and 2007.⁵⁴

As stated earlier, the SP claims to be the only 'true Islamist' party. When the former mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, led the reformist group of the Welfare/Felicity Party to leave the traditionalists and establish a new party—the AKP—in August 2001, they decided to have a radical break.⁵⁵ The reformists emphasised the idea of a new and clean ('*ak*' literally means both white and clean in Turkish) leadership determined to eradicate corruption from the state system. The new leadership used the Islamic card very carefully by articulating modernist, nationalist, and most recently human rights and democratic discourses.⁵⁶ Based on the experience of their predecessors, they had no option but to work through their 'ambivalence' towards religion.⁵⁷

The new AKP leadership used three predominant themes during the election campaigns: reformist, liberal and pluralist in accordance with the forces of globalisation and market economy.⁵⁸ In 2002 many voters wanted to get rid of the old leadership and two-thirds of them had never voted for Islamist parties before. One of the crucial factors was the economic crisis of 2001, causing voters to try out a new party and its promising leadership. Many analysts argue that the AKP came to power not only by playing the democratic game but also by combining the power of democracy with support for an emerging Muslim bourgeoisie based on 'green capital' (*yeşil sermaye*), media and the discourse of reformist nationalism.⁵⁹ There was an unexpected consequence of this process. It led to the emergence of a new socio-cultural group with influential economic power that reflected back upon traditional, conservative and religious values. This social dynamic triggered a new cycle within which AKP supporters became aware of their 'Muslim-selves'. Within this new cycle, the headscarf issue is especially significant for an understanding of the rise of politically aware Muslim-selves and the increasing public visibility of Islam in Turkish politics.

The public visibility of Islam

While the AKP introduced new blood into politics and the economy, the majority of its voters were also enticed by identity issues. For many AKP voters the party also represents the need for personal freedom to express their religious identity, which is marginalised and excluded in the public sphere. It is not surprising that the most controversial headscarf issue was in eighth place—way below more significant concerns about the economy, corruption

and joining the EU.⁶⁰ The AKP was clever enough not to prioritise the headscarf issue before gaining full power in government, getting the president elected, and establishing its political and economic credibility. When the pragmatic AKP leadership stated its intention to remove the headscarf ban it triggered the next stage of a political crisis between the government and the secular establishment. The headscarf issue not only acts as a symbol of the increasing visibility of Islam but also challenges the borders and meanings of the secular public sphere in Turkish politics. The public visibility of Islam also has a 'reflexive' character as a social condition. According to Turner:

Performative reflexivity is a condition, in which a socio-cultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, and codes, roles, statutes, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other socio-cultural components which make up their public 'selves'.⁶¹

I argue that the 'reflexive' character of the public visibility of Islam in Turkey has operated at four levels: first, the control of religion by the state led to the repression of Islam and suppression of Muslim identity that emphasised 'Muslim-selves'. On the second level, the focus on Muslim 'public selves' was regarded as 'reactionary' for its potential subversion of the secular system by a holy trinity of Republicans—the army, the CHP and the Kemalists. On the third level, secular Turks were politically constructed as the new social reactionaries against the increased public visibility of Islam. Lastly, religious conservatives reflected this secularist reaction back upon themselves by increasing their support for the AKP as the true representative of 'Muslim-selves'. Consequently it was during the 2002 and 2007 elections that the AKP supporters carried out a 'performative reflexivity' to reinsert their public 'Muslim-selves' as a social condition, which contributed towards a landslide victory as an unexpected outcome and cleared the way for Gül's presidency. The question remains as to whether or not this development should be interpreted as the transformation of Turkey from a secular to an Islamic state.

For the majority of its supporters the AKP's tenure in power does not entail the Islamisation of state institutions. Rather the party aims to represent a true sense of collective identity ('Muslim-selves') and to remove attention away from state and high politics, which denies the public role of Islam in society. In this context the 'fear of Islamisation' and the alleged hidden agenda of the AKP seem to be exaggerated. As explained earlier, the AKP used a populist and positivist nationalist discourse during the elections and the government, like its predecessors, continues to operate within the structure of the existing political and economic system.⁶² The AKP's policies demonstrate that the public visibility of Islam is usually worked out through ambivalence, which allows a crossover between Islam and modernity, and between secular and religious practices.⁶³ Nonetheless, the paradox that the AKP leaders had to resolve was related to identity issues because of its ambivalence towards Islam.

The AKP had an identity problem in 2002 when it separated from the strongly Islamist Welfare/Felicity Party. With the elections of 2007 the AKP moved to the centre right of the political spectrum from its ambivalent religious basis. In fact, this proved to be its best move. It was the third time in Turkish political history that a centre-right party had gained such a majority: The Democrat Party with 57% in 1954; the Justice party with 52% in 1961; and the AKP with 47% of votes in 2007. Turkish voters have acted decisively on three occasions, using the ballot box as an 'opposition' to the intervention of the military into politics: the first 1954 election result echoed the end of the one-party (CHP) regime; the second, after the 1960 coup, showed a determination for the continuation of the parliamentary system; while the third reflected the response to the army's 27 April e-memorandum.⁶⁴ The 2007 election result confirmed that the majority regarded the AKP as the right party to represent Turkey: 'global, tradesmen, secular, worldly but also conservative and pious'.⁶⁵ The secular establishment, however, interprets this social reflexivity and increased public visibility of Islam as a threat to the secular character of the Turkish state.

The AKP's hidden agenda

The AKP's victory can be explained through the complex causation of specific social, economic and ideational conditions in Turkey. According to a KONDA public poll (the same research agency predicted the AKP's victory with 47% of votes before the election), two crucial issues influenced voters' decisions in 2007: economic stability (78.3%) and corruption (38.9%). The next three key issues concerned security (14.7%), democracy (13.9%) and secularism (10.3%).⁶⁶ More favourable views of the AKP government were linked to the economic growth experienced since 2002.

A Pew Research Center poll also confirms the major role of economic growth in Turkey's election results. Its survey revealed that 61% of Turks believed that the government had made good progress with the economy. Among 47 countries polled, Turkey shared the top position with Argentina for this belief. A similar increase in the rate of approval for the government programme was also evident in other emerging markets, such as Venezuela, India and China.⁶⁷

Both Turkish and Western analysts also agree on other multiple causes of the AKP's victory: stability in domestic and foreign relations, the 27 April 'e-memorandum' and the crisis over the presidential candidacy, pro-EU policies, inclusive discourses on Kurdish identity, and avoiding a military incursion into northern Iraq.⁶⁸ Voters preferred reform and change, economic growth and political stability and the AKP was seen as the only party to deliver such expectations. More importantly, 45%–50% of voters also find the AKP a reformist party that can challenge the existing status quo.⁶⁹ The acid test the AKP leaders have to pass depends on the extent to which they can realise these expectations. Although there is strong evidence that the AKP's policies cannot be interpreted 'as a deviation from the country's modernisation process', demonstrated by the government's pro-EU

political reforms, the secular establishment remains sceptical of the AKP's hidden agenda to 'Islamise' the state.⁷⁰ The AKP's political promises and EU commitments to different segments of society and the international community imply that the party can neither afford to adopt any 'anti' discourses such as anti-modernisation, anti-West, anti-globalisation, nor to engage in conflicts with the secular establishment.⁷¹

AKP leaders found themselves in another conflict with the secular establishment over the Constitutional Court's indictment against their party, however. Events since August 2007 show that the AKP no longer operates through ambivalence towards Islam and has lost its credentials as the defender of democratisation in Turkey. First, the government's decision to elevate Gül to the presidency was a radical step.⁷² According to secularists, Gül's ascent to the highest position in Turkey was part of the AKP's hidden agenda to Islamise state institutions by stealth.⁷³ The secular establishment argues that Gül's presidency puts the mechanism of checks and balances between secularists and Islamists in danger when the governing party controls the presidency as well as the prime minister's post. Second, on 14 July 2008 the prosecution of 86 people, including retired army officers, businessmen, academics and journalists charged with 'forming an armed terror group and plotting to overthrow the Government by force' indicated a new political crisis as part of a continuing power struggle between the AKP and the secular establishment.⁷⁴ For those who are sceptical about the AKP government, this series of events calls the government's dedication to secular democracy into question.

In relation to the first accusation, in response to sceptics Abdullah Gül emphasised that the protection of secularism (*laiklik*) was one of his basic principles when he was elected. He also emphasised that he would be loyal to the Turkish constitutional system.⁷⁵ On an international level another reassuring statement came from Gül when he addressed the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on 3 October 2007, the first Turkish president to do so: the basic principle of the Turkish Republic defined by the 1982 Constitution that 'Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law' could not be changed and this principle would be protected in the new constitution.⁷⁶ As Gül promises, as long as he stays loyal to the constitution when making decisions on state affairs and keeps his religious affairs private he will prove that one can be both Muslim and secular.

On the second issue, the prosecution of a group of ultra-nationalists, who allegedly orchestrated a coup against the government, without evidence was an error of judgement. It gives the impression not only that the civil liberties of people who adhere firmly to a secular lifestyle and identity are under threat but also that any anti-government activity will be dealt with in authoritarian ways. Such an image is not desirable for a modern democratic Turkey.

Nonetheless, the AKP leaders were given a new chance when the Constitutional Court decided not to close down their party. Their future policies will prove whether the AKP is a religious party of the past or a progressive party of the 21st century. They will show their dedication to

Turkey as a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law, which guarantees equal rights and civil liberties to all citizens without ethnic, cultural or religious discrimination. In particular, on the headscarf issue as the key symbol of the public visibility of Islam, the AKP has to produce a coherent policy that will guarantee the rights of women irrespective of their clothing. Women who chose to wear headscarves should not be excluded from the public sphere or denied educational rights; similarly, secular women should not have the wearing of them imposed upon them in a functioning democratic system. Hence, the real issue at stake is not the clash of Islamist and secularist but the complex interdependency between secularism and democratisation in a Muslim context.

Implications for the 21st century

‘Having experienced the bad and good of the West in secularism and democracy’, as claimed by Samuel Huntington, is Turkey in transition from a secular to an Islamic state under the policies of the AKP government? This article’s findings indicate a resounding no. The article has sought to demonstrate that the rise of political Islam in Turkey in the context of the AKP’s tenure in power needs to be understood within a complexity of social, economic, historical and ideational factors. Three general conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, Turkey is neither a bridge nor a country torn between the Western and Islamic civilisations, as claimed by Huntington. In particular, the key requirements of redefining a torn country’s civilisational identity—that AKP supporters as true Islamists are expected to be against Turkey’s pro-Western orientation; that the public should accept this redefinition reluctantly but without protests; and that the dominant elements in the host civilisation must be willing to embrace the convert—have been tested through the Turkish elections of 2002 and 2007. It was concluded that Huntington’s claims do not correspond with Turkey’s political realities. The puzzle that the AKP presents is more complex than is presented by Huntington’s clash of civilisations thesis.

Second, the complexity of the role of Islam in Turkish politics was analysed through the AKP’s ambivalent attitude towards religion and the headscarf issue. It was argued that the public visibility of Islam had a reflexive character as a social condition, in which AKP supporters reinserted their ‘Muslim-selves’. Hence, Muslim identity is not merely religious, but is an historical political marker and part of collective identity. Meanwhile, the AKP’s policies demonstrated that the public visibility of Islam usually functioned through ambivalence, which allowed a crossover between Islam and modernity and between secular and religious practices and identities.

Third, therefore, the assumed clash of secular and Muslim identities is misleading. The real struggle is not between pious and secular Turks. The fundamental problem that underlies the conflict is the power struggle between the AKP and the secular establishment during the consolidation of democracy in Turkey. Based on at least a century or more of experience, the AKP and the secular establishment have an opportunity to prove that one can

be both Muslim and secular within a democratic system. The sociological and historical experience of Turkey shows that secularism and democracy mutually reinforce each other in a Muslim context.

Under these circumstances the ruling AKP has no option but to protect the basic principles of secular democracy and, thus, to prove that the allegedly hidden Islamic agenda of the government is an exaggeration. If the AKP has a hidden agenda to change the secular democratic character of the state it will not only jeopardise Turkey's EU membership but also take the country back at least a century. Neither the AKP nor the secular establishment can afford to miss an historical opportunity of promoting the idea that Islam and secularism are compatible within a democratic system. It is at this juncture, at the turn of the 21st century, that Turkey can establish its credentials as Muslim and secular not as a torn country.

Notes

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- 1 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Father of Turks) is considered the founder of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923. The followers of his ideas are described as Kemalist, while the state ideology is described as Kemalism—based on the six principles of republicanism (*cumhuriyetçilik*), nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), secularism (*laiklik*), statism (*devletçilik*), populism (*halkçılık*) and reformism (*devrimcilik*), which were first identified as the main principles of Atatürkism (*Atatürkçülük*) and then codified in the Fourth Congress of the People's Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) in 1935. AT Kışlalı, *Kemalizm, Laiklik ve Demokrasi*, Ankara: Imge, 1994; T Alkan, 'Kemalism and demokrasi', *Radikal* (Istanbul), 26 July 2007; 'A rumble is heard in Atatürk's grave,' *New York Times*, 20 May 2007; and P Anderson, 'Kemalism', *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2008.
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